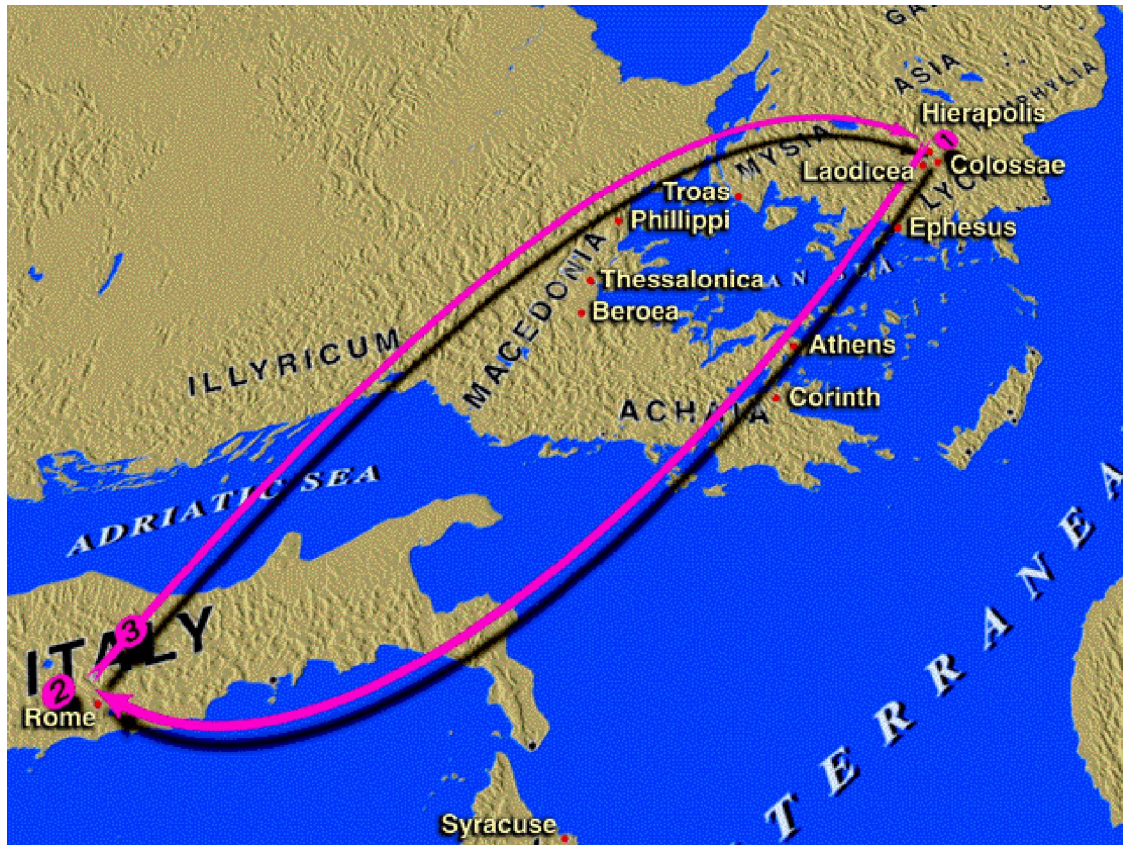


Paul's Letter to Philemon



Events Leading to the Writing of Paul's Letter to Philemon, Written From Rome During Paul's First Imprisonment, c. A.D. 62

The Epistle of Paul to PHILEMON **INTRODUCTION**

1. Title. Inasmuch as this book is a personal letter, doubtless it originally bore no title. The earliest Greek manuscripts extant have the simple title *Pros Philēmona* ("To Philemon"), a superscription probably added by the unknown Christian who first brought Paul's epistles together and published them as a collection.

2. Authorship. This epistle specifically claims Paul as its author (v. 1). The fact that it deals only with a personal circumstance and that it reflects no attempt to promote any new teaching is a strong indication that it is genuine. Today scholars are virtually unanimous in accepting this brief epistle as authentically Pauline.

3. Historical Setting. The Epistle to Philemon is a personal letter from the apostle Paul, while imprisoned at Rome, to a Christian named Philemon living in Colossae. For a discussion of the date of this epistle see Vol. VI, pp. 105, 106. It was dispatched at the same time as the Epistle to the Colossians, by Paul's friend, Tychicus, and was occasioned by a crisis in the life of one of Paul's converts. Onesimus, a slave of the Christian Philemon of Colossae, dissatisfied with his servile state, had run away, carrying with him some of his master's money or possessions (v. 18; cf. AA 456). In time he found his way to Rome, as did many slaves, expecting to lose himself in the vast crowds

of that city. While there Onesimus met Paul. Perhaps he was destitute and was prompted to seek out the Christians because of their charity, which he doubtless had often witnessed in his master's household. Or, perhaps, while in Rome, he absorbed enough of Christian teaching to be suffering from a troubled conscience, and turned to Paul—who may previously have been a guest in Philemon's home—for spiritual guidance.

Whatever his reason, Onesimus found a ready welcome and was inspired to minister devotedly to the aged apostle. His conscience and will prepared him to follow the path of duty, to redeem his past misdeeds by returning once more to his former master. Onesimus did not wait to see what response his master would make to Paul's letter. Rather, he set out with Tychicus, Paul's messenger. What his reception was no one knows, but it would be difficult to imagine that Philemon, as a follower of Christ, would not bend to so tender a plea of intercession. The dignified restraint of the letter reflects confidence on the apostle's part that Philemon would receive Onesimus as a "brother beloved" (v. 16). We may suppose that Paul's confidence was rewarded.

Without an understanding of the slave problem as it existed in the Roman Empire of Paul's day the Epistle to Philemon cannot be fully appreciated. Slaves were a recognized part of the social structure and were considered members of their master's household. Between the years 146 B.C. and A.D. 235 the proportion of slaves to freemen is said to have been three to one. Pliny says that in the time of Augustus a freedman by the name of Caecilius held 4,116 slaves (see *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1966 ed., vol. 20, pp. 776, 777, art. "Slavery").

With so large a part of the population under bondage the ruling class felt obliged to enact severe laws to prevent escape or revolt. Originally, in Roman law the master possessed absolute power of life and death over his slaves. The slave could own no property. Everything he had belonged to his master, though at times he was allowed to accumulate chance earnings. Slaves could not legally marry, but were nevertheless encouraged to do so because their offspring increased the master's wealth. The slave knew that he might be separated from his mate and children at the pleasure of his master. Slaves could not appeal to civil magistrates for justice, and there was no place where a fugitive slave could find asylum. He could never serve as a witness, except under torture, and he could not accuse his master of any crimes except high treason, adultery, incest, or the violation of sacred things. If a master was accused of a crime, he could offer his slave to be interrogated by torture in his place. The punishment for running away was often death, sometimes by crucifixion or by being thrown to voracious lampreys in a fishpond.

Some slaveowners were more considerate than others, and some slaves showed great devotion to their masters. Certain tasks committed to slaves were relatively pleasant, and a number required a high degree of intelligence. Often teachers, physicians, and even philosophers became slaves as a result of military conquest. Many slaves ran shops or factories or managed estates for their masters. But the institution of slavery was a school for cowardice, flattery, dishonesty, graft, immorality, and other vices, for above all else a slave had to cater to his master's wishes, however evil. By about A.D. 200, conditions had improved greatly, and even more so after the spread of Christianity.

The Romans did not deny their slaves all hope of freedom. The law provided for their manumission, or liberation, in various ways. Most commonly, the master took his slave before an official, in whose presence he turned the slave around and pronounced the longed-for words *liber esto*, "Be free," and struck him with a rod. Manumission could

also be performed by various other means, such as writing a letter, making the slave guardian of one's children, or placing on his head the *pileus*, or cap of liberty. But unless manumission was decreed by law rather than by a private owner, the slave was bound to remain a client to his master and to perform any obligations placed upon him at the time of manumission. In the Roman Empire it was possible for freedmen to rise steadily to positions of influence and even of civic authority, but their property, when they died without heirs, reverted to their former masters. One such instance was that of Felix, procurator of Judea (see Vol. V, p. 70).

4. Theme. This little gem of Christian love and tact is unique in the canon of Scripture because it is a purely personal letter dealing with a domestic problem of the day—the relationship between a Christian master and a fugitive, but repentant, slave. It states no doctrine and offers no specific exhortation for the church as a whole. Nevertheless, that the Epistle to Philemon belongs in our Bible becomes amply clear through a study of the letter and its relationship to the other Pauline epistles. It is the only extant fragment of what must have been a considerable correspondence between Paul and individual members of his flock. It applies several basic principles of Christianity to daily life.

5. Outline.

- I. Salutation, 1–3.
- II. Commendation to Philemon, 4–7.
 - A. His Christian love and faithfulness cheered church members, 4–6.
 - B. Paul gratified by the spiritual achievements of his convert, 7.
- III. Appeal for the Wholehearted Reception of Onesimus, 8–20.
 - A. The tactfulness of entreaty, 8–10.
 - B. The profitableness of Onesimus, 11–13.
 - C. Mutual respect between Paul and Philemon, 14.
 - D. The recognition of Providence, 15, 16.
 - E. The sufficient mediatorship of Paul, 17–19a.
 - F. The double debt of Philemon, 19b, 20.
- IV. Conclusion and Benediction, 21–25.

4 *He rejoiceth to hear of the faith and love of Philemon, 9 whom he desireth to forgive his servant Onesimus, and lovingly to receive him again.*

1. Paul. Paul generally begins his epistles with a reference to his divine credentials as an apostle. However, because this epistle was not intended primarily to be read in public but was sent specifically to an old friend, Paul's apostolic authority did not need to be stressed.

Prisoner of Jesus Christ. Paul's present status as a "prisoner" was in decided contrast with Philemon's memory of Paul as the zealous evangelist, the indefatigable traveler, the untiring administrator. Philemon knew that Paul's present disgrace and hardship were the result of faithful witnessing for the Christ they both served. Though Philemon is committed to the same bondage in Christ, he at least enjoys physical freedom. Paul here touches Philemon's compassionate heart. How much personal pride is Philemon willing to sacrifice as a fellow "prisoner of Jesus Christ"? Paul writes to a beloved friend with bold, crisp strokes, in the virility of consecrated manhood.

Timothy. Philemon may have become acquainted with Timothy during the latter's association with Paul at Ephesus (see Acts 19:22). Perhaps a close bond of friendship had

developed between Philemon and Timothy; thus the mention of Timothy's name here indicates his concern regarding the delicate relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, as well as his concurrence with Paul in all that is written.

Our brother. A reference to the great brotherhood of all Christians to which Paul, Timothy, Philemon, and now Onesimus belong. Paul here relies upon this fraternal spirit as he seeks a gentle reception for a fugitive slave. This spirit would ultimately destroy the institution of slavery itself.

Philemon. Nothing is known about Philemon except what is revealed in this epistle. Apparently he lived at Colossae, because Onesimus was a Colossian (see on Col. 4:9), as was Archippus (see Col. 4:17). A convert of Paul's (see Philemon 19), Philemon was a person of considerable means and social (see v. 2). Consequently, his action regarding Onesimus would greatly influence his family, the group of Christians among whom he labored, and his pagan community.

Our dearly beloved. Philemon will find difficulty in ignoring counsel given in such sincerity and brotherly affection. Genuine affection is so rarely expressed, especially among men. Paul exemplifies the many tender traits as well as the sterner qualities that sincere Christian men will always exhibit.

Fellowlabourer. Perhaps Philemon had labored with Timothy and Paul in evangelizing Ephesus and the surrounding area (Acts 19:26). However, Paul may simply refer to the work of Philemon in developing the church at Colossae. Paul knows that Philemon's leadership is dependable and worth commending.

2. Beloved. Textual evidence favors (cf. p. 10) the reading "sister," that is, one who is a sister in Christian fellowship. Paul grants Apphia equal status with himself and Philemon. The elevation of womanhood is one of Christianity's great contributions to the human race, this being one of the many instances in the NT where the dignity of a woman is emphasized. In most pagan societies the woman is limited to a kind of serfdom, but Christianity has emancipated her from this condition and has granted her a position of social and spiritual equality with her husband. The ennobling companionship of Christian, and even many non-Christian, homes today may be traced to the inspired teachings of Jesus Christ.

Archippus. In view of the close connection in which Archippus is mentioned with Philemon and Apphia he may have been their son. Paul commended Archippus, his "fellowsoldier," for his aggressive Christian leadership. Perhaps he directed the affairs of the Colossian church during the absence of Epaphras, the regular leader (Col. 4:17).

Church. Gr. *ekklēsia* (see on Matt. 18:17).

Thy house. Some believe that this refers specifically to the servants and other members of Philemon's household. Others, however, believe Paul refers to a Christian congregation that met for worship in this home. That early Christians met in private homes for church services is amply attested in the NT. For example, Mary's home in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), the house of Priscilla and Aquila in Rome (Rom. 16:3-5), their house in Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:19), and the house of Nymphas in Laodicea (Col. 4:15). In large cities several church services would be conducted simultaneously in various homes. Paul knew that the whole church would be interested in the return of Onesimus. This letter was doubtless read in their hearing, for all would probably need its counsel to help them realize what was their Christian duty in regard to Onesimus. That Philemon's house

was of sufficient size to accommodate a congregation for worship suggests that he was a man of means and social influence.

3. Grace. For an identical greeting see on Rom. 1:7.

4. Always. To be connected with “I thank my God.”

My prayers. Sharing with God the joys and sorrows of life as friend to friend, is prayer at its best. Again, Paul reminds Philemon of the deep respect and gratitude the apostle feels toward him. Tactfully, Paul prepares the way for Philemon to accord Onesimus a kindly reception. There is an abundance of encouragement in the certain knowledge that a beloved and respected friend is praying for us, that this friend has full confidence in our integrity and sanctified judgment (see vs. 5–7). Such is the assurance that Paul gives Philemon.

5. Hearing. That is, from either Epaphras or Onesimus (Col. 1:7, 8; 4:12, 13).

Love. Gr. *agapē* (see on 1 Cor. 13:1). Philemon’s love was not mere sentimentality. His devotion was consistently expressed by his deeds, both for God and his fellow men. Paul assumes that Philemon will manifest the same Christian love and faithfulness in his reception of Onesimus.

Faith. Love and faith are qualities that genuine Christians exercise toward both God and man.

Saints. Gr. *hagioi*, literally, “holy ones” (see on Rom. 1:7).

6. Communication. Gr. *koinōnia*, “fellowship,” “sharing.” In addition to thanking God for Philemon’s helpfulness and encouragement, Paul also prays that Philemon may abound in recognizing every opportunity to manifest his Christian love and faithfulness.

Acknowledging. Gr. *epignōsis* (see on Eph. 1:17).

Every good thing. Philemon is widely known for his magnanimity and general helpfulness; Paul here prays that in no instance will he fail to manifest Christian “love and faith” (v. 5). Toward all men, at every opportunity, the genuine Christian will exhibit the graces of “love and faith.” With tact born of genuine love Paul reasons not only with Philemon but with the congregation at Colossae, who will be reading this letter. Not only Onesimus but all the Christian slaves at Colossae should exhibit “love and faith.”

In you. Or, “among you,” that is, all those, including the slaves, who are church members at Colossae or elsewhere.

7. Have. Textual evidence favors (cf. p. 10) the reading “had.” Paul here amplifies the reason for his thankfulness (v. 4). When the report came to Paul of Philemon’s faithfulness (v. 5), the toilsome hours the apostle had spent in preaching the gospel at Colossae, and to Philemon in particular (v. 19), were amply rewarded.

Joy and consolation. In prison Paul had probably reflected with pleasure on the past hospitality of Philemon. Pleasant memories brought him “joy and consolation.”

Bowels. Literally, “the abdominal viscera.” Anciently the abdominal organs were considered the seat of the emotions.

Brother. A simple touch of affection—but who can measure its value when sincerely said? Philemon has never failed Paul; in the case of Onesimus, Paul has no doubt that Philemon will continue to be worthy of his confidence.

8. Wherefore. That is, on the basis of Philemon’s splendid record of genuine “love and faith” (vs. 4–7) Paul feels sure that his counsel regarding Onesimus will be graciously received. Because Philemon understands and practices intelligent Christian

love, Paul will appeal only on that level. This assumption is a genuine compliment to Philemon, an expression of sincere appreciation for his Christian witness. Not all who profess Christianity are willing to take direction from others, even when it is imparted by those of superior training and experience.

Bold. Gr. *parrēsia* (see on Acts 4:13).

To enjoin. Gr. *epitassō*, “to order,” “to command.” Paul’s position as an apostle and as Philemon’s father in the faith (v. 19) presupposes the authority to which Paul could have appealed in directing Philemon to accept Onesimus as a Christian brother. There is no doubt in Paul’s mind that Philemon would have responded to any direction given him by an apostle of high authority. But Paul knew of a better way (see on v. 9). No greater compliment could be accorded any man than the frank admission that he lives above and beyond mere rules and injunctions, that his personal life is guided by the higher bidding of a personal commitment to Jesus Christ and to Christian principles.

That which is convenient. Or, “your duty,” that is, as a genuine Christian.

9. Love’s sake. As a gifted leader, Paul does not command. In presenting the need and objective to be attained the apostle consistently appeals to all the nobler motives to which a genuine Christian would respond. Challenged with the right and nobler response, Paul’s co-workers bent every nerve and muscle to fulfill the apostle’s expectations. Thus, Philemon is here given an opportunity to serve rather than an occasion merely to respond to an order.

Beseech. Or, “appeal to.” The evidence of Paul’s love for both Onesimus and Philemon is repeatedly seen throughout this epistle. Not as someone superior, but as an equal, Paul appeals to Philemon for help in reconciling the problem of Onesimus’ status as a repentant Christian slave. Paul was confident that Philemon would appreciate this gracious approach to resolving the mutual problem.

Paul the aged. Paul’s exact age at the time cannot be determined. About 28 years had passed since the stoning of Stephen, at which time he was called *neanias*, “a young man” (see on Acts 7:58). Consequently, Paul was doubtless in his late fifties or early sixties when this epistle was written. For the date of Philemon see Vol. VI, p. 105. Because of his strenuous life the apostle was worn and tired, yet not so weary as to overlook matters of personal friendship. Some read “ambassador” instead of “aged” because they think Paul here parallels “an ambassador in bonds” (Eph. 6:20). Linguistically and contextually, the reading “ambassador” is unconvincing.

Prisoner of Jesus Christ. See on v. 1.

10. Onesimus. Meaning, “useful.” The delicacy of Paul’s tenderness in introducing the particular problem of Onesimus is revealed in the Greek where the name of Onesimus is reserved until the last of the sentence. Literally, the verse reads: “I beseech you concerning my own child whom I have begotten in these bonds, Onesimus.” Philemon is gently led into the inner chamber of Paul’s heart and thus induced to regard Onesimus as the apostle does. Without the insertion of a statement of Paul’s own tender relationship with Onesimus, Philemon would merely be reminded of all the former misconduct, disobedience, and possible avarice manifested by Onesimus in times past (v. 11).

Paul here uses a strong possessive pronoun which enhances the tender bond existing between him and Onesimus. He writes, literally, “my own son.” Paul thus appealed to Philemon’s heart before his eye would come to the name of his former slave. Because of

Philemon's high regard for Paul he would be anxious to render every possible aid to please him. Whatever the apostle strongly loved, Philemon would not lightly dismiss.

Philemon would notice the parallel between his experience (v. 19) and that of Onesimus—both were “sons” of Paul, his spiritual offspring. Paul often called his converts “beloved children” (see on 1 Cor. 4:14, 15, 17; 1 Tim. 1:2, 18).

Begotten in my bonds. There is no indication here as to how Paul had become acquainted with Onesimus, nor a hint as to why or in what manner Onesimus had come to Paul. In the mysterious working of Providence they were brought together—Paul, who overlooked no opportunities for service, and Onesimus, who courageously responded.

11. Unprofitable. Or, “useless.” It is not certain whether Paul here refers to indolence, or even thievery, while Onesimus worked for Philemon, or to the very absence of Onesimus from Philemon, thus rendering himself “useless” as far as service to his master is concerned. Both may be correct.

But now. That is, since Onesimus had met Paul and been converted. Paul intimates that if Onesimus had not run away he would probably not now be a Christian. A slight suggestion of rebuke may be intended for Philemon. As a Christian he might have done the work for Onesimus that Paul had accomplished. Onesimus had to run away from his earthly master and find the apostle Paul in Rome before he found his true Lord and Master.

Thus Paul meets Philemon's possible objection. Onesimus was at one time unprofitable to Philemon, but is now returning to his master a new and different man. Philemon, as well as Onesimus, will profit by a gracious reception, because Philemon's former slave will now render service vastly different from former days.

And to me. Paul here links himself with Onesimus' interests and future. Consequently, what Philemon does for Onesimus he will be doing for Paul.

12. Have sent. Or, “am sending.” Onesimus was to accompany the letter. There is no evidence that Paul compelled, or even urged, Onesimus to return. Furthermore, Paul had no power to send Onesimus back to Philemon, nor did he have any way of making certain that Onesimus would arrive at Colossae. However, Paul had implicit confidence in Onesimus' integrity. They both knew that Onesimus' Christian duty was to return to Philemon even though his absence would deprive Paul of Onesimus' gracious service. Paul released Onesimus from serving him so that he might serve Philemon.

Thou therefore receive. Textual evidence favors (cf. p. 10) the omission of these words.

Mine own bowels. See on v. 7. In spirit, Paul accompanies the returning slave. By receiving Onesimus, Philemon will not only be welcoming a converted slave but also gratifying the magnanimous heart of Paul himself.

13. I would. Gr. *boulomai*, “to desire,” “to wish.” Paul might personally wish that “profitable” Onesimus would remain in Rome as the apostle's personal attendant. For an aged worker, worn by years of extraordinary service, the personal attentions of a devoted friend could not be measured in money or equaled in any other way. However, though Paul would lose the comfort of Onesimus' presence, he would be inwardly rewarded with the successful reconciliation of his two friends. Consequently Paul would not allow his personal needs to interfere with the more important business of a spiritual triumph, or presume upon the rights of Philemon, legal owner of Onesimus.

In thy stead. The apostle tactfully implies that Philemon would consider personal service to Paul as one of life's highest honors, that if Philemon was able, he himself would be caring for Paul as Onesimus had done. Hence, Philemon not only would rejoice at the gratifying service performed by Onesimus, but would also be grateful that Onesimus was rendering service in his behalf.

Bonds of the gospel. Compare vs. 1, 10. Another gentle reminder that though they both served the same Master, Paul was suffering the hardships of a Roman dungeon while Philemon enjoyed the benefits of freedom along with the blessings of Paul's sacrificial ministry. Philemon's delicate sense of compassion (vs. 5–7) would quickly grasp his responsibility to his revered friend.

4. Mind. Or, "consent," "intention." Although Paul may have been completely certain of Philemon's approval, he will take nothing for granted, always respecting each man's sacred right of free choice. The apostle knows that genuine friendship is built only on free and voluntary expressions of kindness. Therefore, with great courtesy and consideration, Paul insists that Philemon should make all further decisions regarding Onesimus.

Would I. Gr. *thelō*, "to resolve," "to will." Philemon's respect is worth more to Paul than even the physical comfort of Onesimus' services. The apostle's purpose in expressing his personal desires regarding Onesimus was not to inspire sympathy on Philemon's part, so that he would return Onesimus to Paul. Such was beneath Paul. Rather, he so expressed himself with the one intent of stressing the high value he placed on the character and service of Onesimus.

Thy benefit. That is, the benefit accruing to Paul from Philemon's submission to the apostle's decision to keep Onesimus as his personal attendant.

Of necessity. Paul seems to feel satisfied that if he had retained Onesimus in Rome, Philemon would not have objected, but the apostle would not arrange a situation where Philemon's permission would seem to result from compulsion.

15. Perhaps. Although Paul does not state unequivocally that the flight of Onesimus was providential, he does suggest the possibility.

Departed. Literally, "was separated." This seems to be another suggestion that God had a part in Onesimus' flight from Philemon. Onesimus' flight is not here minimized by Paul; it is set within the larger perspective of his new relationship to both God and Philemon.

Season. Whatever time has elapsed since Onesimus left Philemon, it is only a moment compared with the time Philemon will enjoy his companionship in the future.

For ever. Gr. *aiōnios*, literally, "age lasting," that is, in perpetuity, but within limits (see on Matt. 25:41). Onesimus would be Philemon's faithful servant and Christian comrade as long as both should live.

16. Not now. Or, "no longer."

But above a servant. Paul is suggesting that Philemon should accept Onesimus as a Christian brother whose life, like his, is committed to the Lord Jesus Christ. For above the service of a pagan slave Onesimus would render to Philemon devotion such as Paul himself received.

Brother beloved. The love that Paul developed toward Onesimus in a short period suggests the rich fellowship awaiting Philemon, who will associate with Onesimus for a much longer time, Onesimus left as a renegade slave; he returns as a "profitable" (v. 11) Christian brother, an exhibit of the grace of God. To Paul, the experience of Onesimus

illustrates the power of God as He brings good out of evil. Though hindered by the faults and failures of men the Lord can yet accomplish His blessed purposes with those who acknowledge Him.

The indolence and cowardice of Onesimus, which had brought him to Rome, also brought him to Paul and consequently to Jesus Christ. Now he returns to Philemon a transformed man. The temporary separation has resulted in an eternal bond of fellowship. It will not be difficult for Philemon to trace the hand of God in the experiences of his former slave. Consequently, Philemon should count it a personal privilege to cooperate with the will of God for Onesimus.

In the flesh. That is, as a conscientious servant who would amply repay Philemon's confidence in him. Before Onesimus' departure from Rome, Paul enjoyed the blessing of his ministry "in the flesh"; henceforth Philemon alone would be thus benefited.

In the Lord. Regardless of Onesimus' former relationship to Philemon he should now be regarded as a beloved Christian brother and as truly a candidate for heaven as was Philemon himself. Thus, the joy of the Christian hope would be a mutual possession.

17. If. The Greek implies that Paul had no doubt about the close, warm Christian fellowship existing between him and Philemon. Accordingly, the clause may be paraphrased: "since you do regard me as a partner."

Receive him as myself. After a long and carefully worded preamble, Paul makes this definite request, which constitutes the climax of the epistle. Even in making this petition, which has been delayed by delicate and graceful tact, Paul appeals to a very real and tender motive in Philemon, that of personal friendship. From the standpoint of his legal rights Philemon could proceed with other action than that which Paul suggests. But Paul rises above mere justice and rests his case on the summit of love. Because of Philemon's unquestioned respect for Paul's judgment and his gratitude for the apostle's love, Onesimus will be received on the basis of Paul's estimate of him. For a man like Philemon that will be enough.

18. If. The Greek emphasizes the reality, from Paul's viewpoint, of Onesimus' debt to Philemon. However, the conditional clause allows Philemon the privilege of judging whether, under the present circumstances, Onesimus actually owes him anything. Onesimus had stolen from Philemon before departing and as a Christian he would be expected to make full restitution, without question. Some suggest that the loss here considered is that of Onesimus' services, services which could be financially assessed since Philemon had to substitute another servant to fill Onesimus' post.

Paul is here not making a veiled hint that Philemon should cancel Onesimus' financial debt because of Philemon's debt to Paul. Such a procedure contradicts the high ethical principles by which Paul guides his conduct.

Mine account. Paul desires that no obstacle should hinder an unreserved reception of Onesimus when he arrives in Colossae. Paul would have the debt incurred by the runaway slave charged to him personally, as a father covers the debts of his son (v. 11). Such foresight and love that cover the failures of a repentant sinner reflect the glorious splendor of Christ's great deed for men who recognize their debt to God. Christ, like Paul, was not responsible for the failures of men. Yet He stands in man's stead, covering his debt with His own merits, so that the repentant sinner may be justified before all creation. Christ, like Paul, was willing to pay another's debt so that the sinner may be received by all as though he had committed no wrong. Therefore, when the repentant

servant returned, Philemon was not to see Onesimus and his debt, but Paul and his promise of repayment. Could language be more gracious and yet more poignant than what the master letter writer here pens?

19. *Mine own hand.* Most probably Paul wrote the whole letter with his “own hand” (cf. on Gal. 6:7).

I will repay. This is Paul’s promissory note removing the last obstacle that might delay or hinder Philemon’s fullhearted acceptance and reception of Onesimus.

Owest. Paul kindly reminds Philemon of his double debt to Paul. Philemon is indebted to Paul because Onesimus is now a “profitable” (v. 11) servant worth far more “both in the flesh, and in the Lord” (v. 16). In addition, Philemon is indebted to Paul for the joy and peace of the Christian gospel, through Paul’s ministry. The apostles wants nothing to hinder a successful reconciliation of master and slave. Paul had converted them both, and such a debt no money can repay. Thus Philemon will see his own larger debt to Paul.

20. *Yea.* Gr. *nai*, a particle of confirmation (cf. Matt. 15:27; Rom. 3:29; Rev. 14:13) which anticipates an affirmative reply to the request of Philemon 17.

Have joy. Gr. *oninēmi*, “to receive profit,” “to have joy,” from which the proper noun “Onesimus,” is derived (see on v. 10). This delicate situation is filled with benefits for all concerned. Each participant—Paul, Onesimus, Philemon—will derive immeasurable personal profit from a wholehearted, gracious reception of Onesimus at Colossae. Paul desires no material profit, only the joy of seeing two of his converts united in the bond of Christian fellowship. Not selfishness, but a loving desire to see a demonstration of Christian nobility among his own converts, here motivates Paul.

Refresh my bowels. See on vs. 7, 12. The minister’s highest joy consists in the manifestation of Christian principles among his converts.

In the Lord. That is, in a manner of which the Lord would approve.

21. *Obedience.* Not in the submissive sense, to a direct command from Paul, because no command is given (see on v. 9) in this letter. Rather, Paul is confident of Philemon’s compliance with the high call of Christian duty. The opportunity to exercise the forgiving love of Christ again confronts Philemon. On the basis of his past performance (see on vs. 5–7) Paul has no question about Philemon’s response.

Do more than I say. Some believe that Paul here suggests the manumission, or setting free, of Onesimus. Paul doubtless hoped that this would be the case (see AA 457). He is confident that Philemon will extend an unreserved welcome to Onesimus, the extent of his welcome measured only by his magnanimous spirit.

The NT does not directly attack the institution of slavery, but it does outline principles that would eventually prove fatal to this institution. In view of the social structure of the Roman Empire Paul’s procedure could hardly be improved upon. He proclaimed the principles of Christian freedom throughout and led men to acknowledge the inhumaneness of slavery. Thus he carried out God’s plan for solving the slave problem by the slower process of growth and enlightenment, rather than by direct attack upon it (see on 1 Cor. 7:20–24; Eph 6:5).

22. *Withal.* Or, “at the same time,” that is, when Philemon gives his warm welcome to Onesimus.

Lodging. Paul here, unobtrusively, expresses his implicit confidence in Philemon’s good judgment regarding Onesimus. Only genuine friends, bound in mutual respect,

would write as frankly regarding accommodations as Paul does here. Philemon would give Paul no occasion to lose faith in his integrity. Apparently, Paul had reason to expect an early release from prison. Tradition states that soon after this letter was written, Paul fulfilled his promise to visit Colossae (cf. Phil. 2:24; see Vol. VI, p. 30).

Trust. Or, “hope.”

Through your prayers. That is, prayers that were being offered up for his release, probably those of the entire church in Philemon’s house (v. 2) as well as the intercession of other church members scattered throughout Christendom.

Shall be given. Deeply conscious of his apostolic office, Paul feels the importance of his presence in the churches. Yet with noble humility he confesses that only their intercession would secure his release.

23. Epaphras. Perhaps the founder and leader of the churches at Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis (see Col 1:7; 4:12, 13).

My fellowship. See on Rom. 16:7. Imprisoned like Paul (see Philemon 1, 9, 13), because he preached Christianity.

24. Marcus. Presumably John Mark, the son of Mary (see Acts 12:12) and writer of the second Gospel—the young man who was Paul’s companion on his First Missionary Journey (see on Acts 13:13; 15:37; Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11).

Aristarchus. See on Acts 19:29; 27:2; Col. 4:10.

Demas. Although a companion of Paul during his imprisonment (Col. 4:14), he later failed him and, apparently, apostatized (see on 2 Tim. 4:10).

Lucas. The physician, who first appears as Paul’s traveling companion on the journey to Macedonia (see on Acts 16:10). He apparently stayed at Philippi for seven years, until Paul’s return (see on Acts 20:5, 6). The records seem to indicate that he remained with Paul until his execution (see Acts 21:15; 27:2; 2 Tim. 4:11).

25. Grace of our Lord. See on Gal. 6:18.

The postscript following v. 25 appears in no ancient manuscript and was not part of the letter as Paul wrote it.

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¹Nichol, F. D. (1978). *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary : The Holy Bible with exegetical and expository comment*. Commentary Reference Series (Phm 1). Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association.